

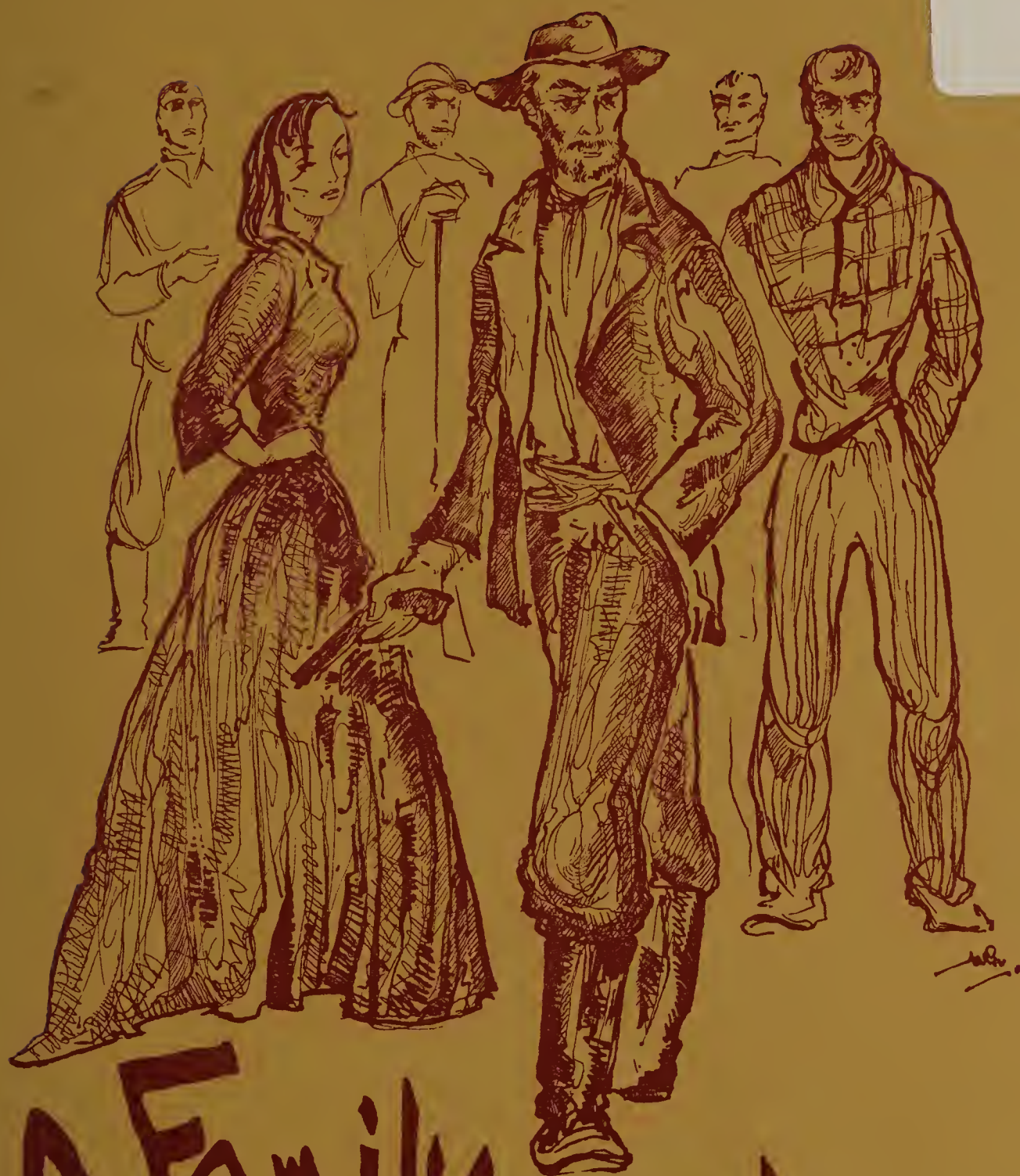
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A Family of Outlaws

by Richard Wilmer Rowan

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A Family of Outlaws

by
Richard Wilmer Rowan

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Prepared by the Staff of the
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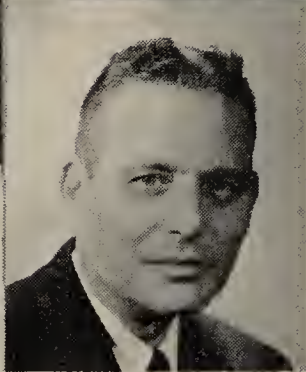
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FOREWORD

Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, famous throughout the United States for over a century, is still a leading private criminal investigation bureau.

The following publication describes the reckless career and violent end of the Reno Gang, Hoosier outlaws of the 1860's. The account originally appeared as Chapter 14, entitled "A Family of Outlaws," in *THE PINKERTONS* by Richard W. Rowan, published by Little, Brown and Company in 1931.

The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this account in the hope that it will interest local readers.



RICHARD W. ROWAN

The son of William Wilmer and Katherine Conkling (Pickel) Rowan, Richard Wilmer Rowan was born in Philadelphia on March 28, 1894. He studied at Brown University (1912-13) and at Columbia University (1913-16).

Rowan began the study of the operations of professional secret agents as a hobby in his youth. His writing career began in his teens; at the age of eighteen he had sold four short stories to magazine publishers. Advised to find a specialty, he chose the cloak and dagger field. He has devoted the ensuing forty years to the study and investigation of international espionage.

His better known works include SPY AND COUNTER-SPY, TERROR IN OUR TIME, JAPANESE SECRET SERVICE AND THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR, and THE STORY OF SECRET SERVICE. His research and his books qualify him as one of the foremost authorities on this subject. Critics have termed his books "objective" and as "avoiding the sensationalism which characterizes much of the current literature on spy activities."

As he pursued his writing specialty, Mr. Rowan branched out into related fields. THE PINKERTONS and the three separate volumes of THE BAFFLE BOOK OF CRIMES TO SOLVE are examples. He has written fiction; he wrote THE SINISTER FRONT and THE MOUNTAIN COMES TO MAHOMET in collaboration with his wife, Ruth G. Rowan.

In 1934 he edited MODERN SPIES TELL THEIR STORIES; in 1941 he conducted a department, "The Game of International I. Q." (counterespionage), for CORONET. He also contributed articles to the ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES and various periodicals. Mr. Rowan has lectured extensively in the United States and Canada. He resides in Jersey City, N.J.

THE Civil War had been a fruitful season for outlawry. A rabble of renegades, flourishing on either side of the imaginary line between North and South, had taken bounties for enlisting in both armies, and had used their vague military status to cover the raids they perpetrated, with attendant feats of homicide, robbery and arson. The capitulation of the Southern leaders bore but little significance for these uniformed banditti. Some were guerillas of such sanguinary record they did not believe they would be *permitted* to surrender. Not a few already had a "dead or alive" price upon their heads. Still others were genuine irreconcilables, who had favoured the Confederate cause while fighting in the main for their own felicity and profit, who now declined to consider the South subdued while they had rifle ammunition and a horse and saddle.

There was then no "shell shock" known to medical science, or any other fancy way of excusing the restlessness ever adrift in the wake of war. They were all of them young and chiefly unreconciled to the dull prospects of peace and honest employment. And so they stayed in the field when the blue and the grey marched home, and their more audacious exemplars gained widespread and sombre renown. The Youngers—the James boys—the Daltons—the Renos !

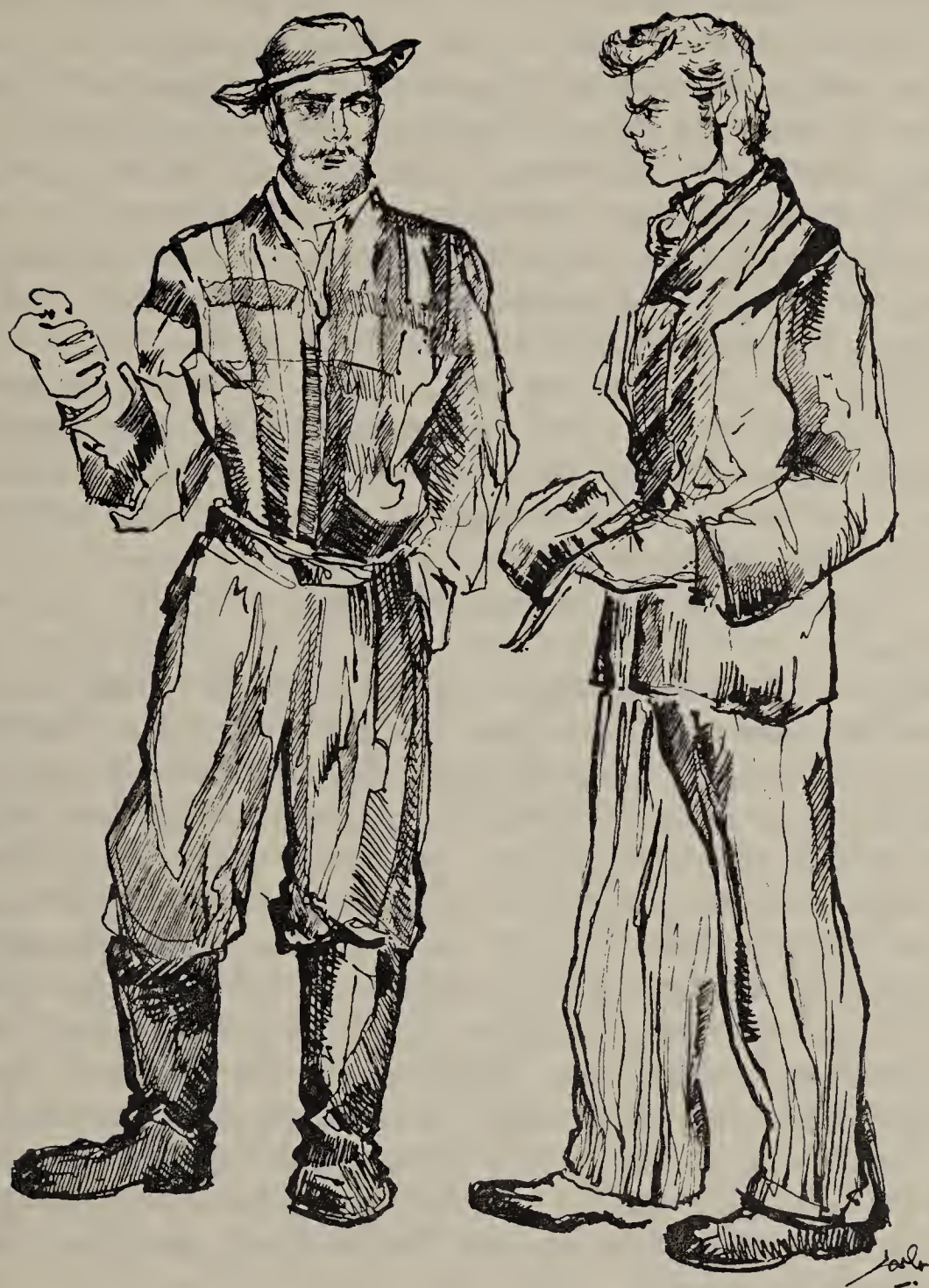
Cole Younger had occasion to swear vengeance against all Pinkertons. However, his impulsive life was filled with many oaths, and he showed, after all, but a train robber's normal aversion to railroad detectives. The Renos might have vowed to kill Allan, his sons, and half his force ; but instead that notorious troupe, with quiet supervision from the Agency, neither paused nor pondered until they had destroyed themselves. They were, of course, a family before they became a gang—a Pennsylvania Dutch mother and Swiss father, and six handsome children, five of them sons. The one daughter, Laura, was not alone remarkable for beauty ; she was a superb

rider and deadly shot, and so violent and devoted a sister that contemporaries called her "the toast and terror of the Middle West". The brothers were John, Frank, William, Sim and Clint, the last known to all his near relatives as "Honest" Reno—which may have been their scorn or merely a standard of comparison.

At the time the activities of the four reckless brothers were brought to the notice of Mr. Pinkerton they had ceased to menace their neighbours and were branching out to distant places. On their farms, centrally located near Seymour, Indiana, they had assembled a desperate, skilful cohort of safe-burglars, counterfeiters, and highwaymen, and were terrorizing three States and laughing heartily at the puny retorts of county authorities. The proceeds of their train and express robberies reached a shocking total. Their lawless expeditions were matters of everyday knowledge. Yet fear of revenge kept the well-informed from testifying against them ; until, it is said, their influence finally arranged the election of officials so corrupt or helpless it was impossible to secure the conviction of any criminal the brothers had cared to sponsor.

At length the Renos pushed their raids beyond Illinois into Missouri, galloping across country and leaving a track of burst safes and murdered men behind them. When they robbed the office of the county treasurer at Gallatin, Daviess County, Missouri, Allan Pinkerton was engaged to answer the challenge. The detective felt certain the safe-cracking was a Reno job ; and he knew of their headquarters and all about them—which included knowing just how difficult it would be to take any leader of the gang from the midst of his armed and formidable followers.

But presently an amiable man drifted into Seymour and opened a saloon. Another stranger came there and found work as switchman and freight-handler at the railroad station. A third, calling himself Phil Oates, settled down at the local hotel, a travelling gambler and inveterate poker-player, whose reliance on luck was sufficiently marked whenever he handled a deck of cards to commend him to the entire community. Oates' popularity grew like the proverbial weed. He was soon on good terms with all the Renos, but especially with John, the eldest. "John Reno led the boys to Gallatin" was a rumour Oates heard repeated by the gang's many loose-tongued and boastful admirers. One very agreeable evening the gambler seemed to encounter John Reno by chance. They stopped and talked, and then Oates suggested in an offhand



They stopped and talked....

way : "Suppose we amble on down to the depôt and see old Number twenty-nine pull in ?"

"Sure, I'm with you," said the outlaw chief. A nationally known bad man, but a small-town youth at heart, John considered the west-bound train's passing a daily event only equalled by that of the earlier local, east-bound. And so off he went to witness the arrival of Number twenty-nine with the genial Phil Oates—who also had a number, kept in the secret register at the Chicago headquarters of the Pinkerton Agency.

Now there were other strangers lurking in Seymour that evening whom even Reno watchfulness had failed to account for. All unsuspecting, John Reno leaned against the freight house and swapped yarns with his companion. Suddenly he noticed one of these strangers coming toward them, and then another. He turned, and he saw three more.

"What in . . . !" he exploded. But there was a crowd of them closing in on him now ; he counted eight. They presented a solid front—the trap had been sprung. John crouched a little as one ready either to fight or run. "Better not try to resist," a commanding voice advised him.

"I don't think he brought along a gun, sir," Oates put in casually.

Six powerful young men who were deputies from Missouri, led by the sheriff of Daviess County and Allan Pinkerton, made sure John had not thought to arm himself merely to watch a train roll in. When he had been fettered securely, a warrant, and even requisition papers procured to oblige the law, were read to the still nonplussed prisoner. How could such a thing as this happen to a Reno—and right here in Seymour, the capital of the outlaws' kingdom ? But all the same, it had happened. On time, and conveniently west-bound, old Number twenty-nine stopped at the Seymour station. Closely surrounded by the eight and Oates—who would hardly be a useful agent there any more—John Reno was helped aboard the train ; and it was far along the line puffing him toward Missouri before any of his brothers even caught the first alarm.

Identified, tried, and convicted of robbery at Gallatin, Brother John was sentenced to serve twenty-five years in the State penitentiary. What a blow that was to him and to the family pride ! Yet there were three sensational Renos left, besides Laura, who was as quick to shoot, as sure and swift on horseback, as complete a desperado as the plans of the

gang would permit. Therefore the Reno raids kept up with remorseless daring.

Early in 1868 the brothers with eight comrades rode forth to cut directly across Indiana and Illinois and show just how heedless of both law and retribution they could be. On the way they paused very frequently, robbed a bank here, plundered a store there, held up a train at the next convenient junction, or declared a kind of holiday, and brazenly defied a whole township. Into one small town near the Indiana State line they cantered in broad daylight, while the court was in session and Main Street uncommonly thronged. None seemed to suspect that the eleven horsemen were bandits until, having reined up at the courthouse, they began gesturing pretty emphatically with their revolvers.

"Sim, you're to wait here and keep an eye on the —— lawyers," Frank Reno reminded his brother. And two others were detached to stay with him. Frank and Bill then led the rest of the band up the street till they came to the local bank. One outlaw, a pistol in each hand, remained on watch beside the horses. The others strode into the bank, Frank Reno ahead and carrying an empty grain-sack. "Fill it up," he ordered. The sack soon began swelling with bags of coin and bundles of currency. "Quick work!" the leader praised his victims when the sack bulged solid with loot. "You can have all our trade in future!"

Laughing uproariously, his allies trooped out after him, remounted and rode leisurely away, pausing to pick up the court-attendant trio, and, still unhurried, came to the edge of the town. But here one chanced to look back and see that some of the more daring citizens ventured to follow them. Bolder spirits "spoiling for a scrap" had seized any sort of arms that came readily to hand, and, with this variety of weapons but a single resolve, now were rushing from their homes to begin sniping the reckless raiders.

It was time, one would think, for a small party of horsemen to use spurs; and the Renos, after their fashion, chose that course. Witness, though, that they wheeled their horses and spurred them into the town again, yelling like the demons they had set out to be and firing their guns at every living thing in sight.

A luckless passenger train was just stopping at the station as they approached, and the gang surrounded that, some of them boarding it, while two took command of the locomotive, forcing the engineer to pull the coaches half a mile down

the track. Here at leisure they looted the mail car, robbed every passenger, and, finishing off expertly, had the engine uncoupled and run forward for some distance, whereupon they so disabled its machinery that the train would be stalled for the afternoon.

Frank Reno had a last word of advice to shout to the conductor. "Don't bother sending a flag back to signal any train coming on behind you. We're going that way, and if there is another train, we'll stop it. Depend upon us!" Then, with nothing unlawful left neglected, all mounted again and galloped off down the line.

It is a point of suspicion that, despite these outrages, the Renos, young, tall and good-looking, bronzed and bold as brass, galloped straight into the hearts of innumerable stay-at-homes, and are riding there still, in the endless serial adventures of other desperadoes of the plains. Yet such popularity as theirs at the time was rather dangerously over-capitalized.

At Magnolia, in Harrison County, Iowa, the safe in the office of the county treasurer was broken open and fifteen thousand dollars carted away—a crime having many resemblances to the robbery at Gallatin, for which John Reno now suffered imprisonment. Pinkerton detectives were already at work on this case when the treasurer of Mills County discovered his safe in the courthouse at Glenwood opened and empty—his loss a bit under eleven thousand dollars. In Council Bluffs the operatives found that the toughest place in town dispensing hard liquor was run by a man formerly resident in Seymour, Indiana. And because of the Renos the very word "Seymour" had come to have a sinister ring to peace officers everywhere in the Middle West.

By watching this saloon the Pinkertons had Michael Rogers brought to their notice—a wealthy and respected citizen of Council Bluffs, who, however, proved to be in league with the men who had done the safe-cracking at Magnolia and Glenwood. In the ensuing round-up Frank Reno himself was the chief prize. But the end of the Reno menace was by no means in sight. There were still Michael Rogers' friends to be reckoned with. Some few had remained loyal when all the rest were disgusted by public exposure of his double life—and it was a mere thirty miles from Council Bluffs to Glenwood. Just five days after the robbers were locked up at the county seat, awaiting trial, certain small garden implements were smuggled in to them; and that night they dug a hole under the wall of the Glenwood gaol. Frank Reno, Rogers



...robbed every passenger...

and two others had vanished by daybreak and were far on their way before any organized chase could begin.

The habit of levying upon tax funds and small country banks and of interrupting railroad passenger traffic is bound at last to raise up a host of furious adversaries. A train was boarded at Marshfield, Indiana, its express car then being violated to the tune of ninety-seven thousand dollars ; and, because the messenger attempted to resist, he was thrown from the moving train and fatally injured. Pinkerton agents still planted in Seymour managed to obtain positive proof that the Reno gang was responsible not only for this Marshfield robbery, but for another on the same road, in which Moore, Gerroll and Sparks, well-known allies of the Renos, took a bit too prominent a part. These men the Pinkertons contrived to surprise and arrest in Seymour, after which bold stroke came a second—as lawless as any venture of the gang. Put aboard a train bound for the gaol at Brownstown, Sparks, Gerroll and Moore were removed from it at a wayside stop by a crowd of masked men, who said very little but carried long ropes. They proceeded grimly to hang the three prisoners to the same tall tree ; and the news of it raced over Indiana.

That hanging, which signified the fierce impatience of honest men, had an immediate and cyclonic effect. The power of the Reno brothers collapsed ; at the mere dress-rehearsal of a Vigilance Committee, the fear they had inspired in their neighbours seemed to disappear in every direction. And the brothers themselves disappeared—the whole nest of hard-riding hornets cleaned out at one stroke !

But Allan Pinkerton was too practised a hand in dealing with criminals to mistake panic for a token of reform. He set a dozen of his best operatives to tracing the Reno leaders. “And when you have caught one of them,” he instructed, “be sure to get him safely to a gaol. We can’t help what outraged people may want to do to a murderer. But the Agency must not stand accused of turning over its prisoners to mobs.”

With almost an excess of gallantry the Pinkertons refrained from hounding the sister, Laura. Her evil influence was acknowledged by all, and her lawless behaviour a byword ; yet even so it did not seem likely that indictments could be secured against the girl. Years later—in 1900—an elderly woman living near Seymour, the wife of a respectable farmer,

admitted to a newspaper correspondent that her maiden name had been Laura Reno.

The brothers William and Sim were rather easily caught up with as near at hand as Indianapolis, and promptly lodged in cells at New Albany. Other detectives traced Frank Reno northward and over the border into Canada, where the old Reno swagger reasserted itself, for he now believed he was immune to arrest. Having brought him to bay in Toronto, the Pinkertons persuaded Canadian police to take him into custody. Frank had ample funds at his disposal, and was not ignorant of the law. He felt sure a smart attorney could compel the Dominion authorities to release him.

In agitating for treaty clauses permitting international extradition, Allan Pinkerton and his sons never failed to refer to the battle they had in getting Frank Reno out of Canada. He exhausted his resources and every dodge of the law before he could be made to yield ; for Frank knew the appetite of vigilantes. Conducted at last to New Albany, with his brothers and one henchman of theirs he awaited a writ of *habeas corpus* from Judge Lynch.

He had enjoyed the complexities of the struggle in court at Toronto, and aspired to rebuild his legal defences in the even more artful atmosphere of an American murder trial. However, it was not to be. When he had been at New Albany a week, the deep undertone of public resentment rose and broke like a wave over that normally peaceful community.

The sheriff, with an additional force of deputies sworn in, telegraphed the governor—knowing well militia could never arrive in time—and then barricaded himself in the gaol. The Vigilance Committee made its appearance just at dusk. There were no masks worn this time : even with mobs there is a certain safety in numbers, and more than a thousand men and boys were surging forward, claiming vengeance upon those who had terrorized three States.

The growl of a furious throng is an animal sound that makes even the roaring of lions recede to a harmless whimper. Shut apart in their separate cells, the three Renos heard it. Sim, the youngest, began to sob ; he had never thought of this when he shouted and spurred his horse and fired point-blank at old men and children in the street that gala day they raided the Indiana town. The brute rumble of the great mob outside penetrated the walls of the stout new gaol as though they were plaster.

Frank Reno, his face a hard grey mask, shouted for the

sheriff, who was also their gaoler ; and that tormented official hurried to the door of his cell and spoke to him considerately, as one does with a man who may be dead within the hour.

"Give my brothers a chance at least, can't you ? They're only youngsters. Sim's not twenty," Frank lied, yet very manfully. "Let them try to make a break for it. Probably not two dozen of those yaps howling for us outside know Sim and Bill by sight. I don't care so much about myself," he added, "if you'll only give these boys a running start."

"Not without you, Frank," Bill Reno called to him hoarsely.

"You all three know," said the sheriff, addressing them together, "that setting you free is the one thing I couldn't do. Not for an instant do I think it would save you. It would, as a matter of hard fact, make matters a hell of a lot easier for me if I turned you loose. But I won't. You're in my keeping—and I'll fight to the last for you."

"We know how you'll fight," Frank managed to jeer, but even his flinty tone broke a little. Sim was sobbing again, and he couldn't bear to hear it.

That sheriff at New Albany did fight and risk his life all through the early evening trying to protect the Reno brothers—whose own lives he knew to be forfeited on account of a score of homicidal crimes. But the fatal ending to it all, from sheer weight of numbers, could not be indefinitely delayed. When the outer gaol door had been battered down, seventeen of the attackers were already wounded. But the sheriff and those deputies still on their feet contested every step of the way.

"Hand us over them cell keys !" roared a hulking farm-hand, his clothes in rags, his face streaked with blood, lunging at the sheriff, who backed away and could have shot him dead, but did not. The sheriff kept aiming high ; and then a great surging mass in the lower corridor bore him down, the keys they sought were wrenched from his belt, and the last moments of the Renos had come.

Frank, when they unlocked his cell door, fought like a madman, and so was almost beaten to death before ever coming actually into the hands of the mob ; Sim, already more dead than alive, had to be carried from his cell ; while Bill kept his head and conceded defeat, walking forth to die at a steady pace, as many condemned men try to do.

"Bring in them ropes !"—"Drag 'em outside !"—"Outside ?—what for ? Look at the rafters there in the lower corridor.



... fought like a madman ...

Who ever saw a better swinging height?" The younger lynchers debated loudly, while older and more sombre men went about their job with an air of unrelenting experience. The rafters of the gaol were, indeed, a singularly convenient height, while the excited crowd around the building made any exterior attempt both difficult and dangerous. "Toss the ropes over that furthest rafter! We'll tend to all three here and now—so's the sheriff can see how regular it's done."

And there in the battered New Albany gaol the Renos who had outlawed themselves were hung.

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